

Stories that Supply Us for Life: Literature and Therapy¹

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Abstract

This writing is a poetical invitation to read novels, as a good way to become a better therapist. In it, I introduce some learnings that in my practice - as a therapist - have been connected with my hobby: read novels. Reading them you can gain alternative, original and creative stories that can enrich your practice. Through writing I introduce some novels and its teaching.

Key words: literature, therapy, novels, fiction, collaborative approach.

In September 2012 during Harlene Anderson's workshop in Merida, someone asked for tips on how to be a better therapist. Upon hearing her request, I thought about how I could have answered and what has been useful to me as a therapist. That motivated me to write about some lessons I have learned, as a collaborative therapist, from my latest literature readings. Through these books, I was able to enjoy, learn from, and imagine lives full of great experiences that have made me laugh and feel intensely.

When we read novels, we are not the ones we usually are, but also the fictional beings among whom the novelist takes us. The move is a metamorphosis: the stifling redoubt that is our real life opens and we get to be others, to live vicariously experiences that fiction makes ours (Vargas Llosa, 2003, p. 21)²

I dare say that through reading fiction, I can become a better therapist. It is a way in which I become enriched with ideas. **Novels are a kind of travel that**, as Vargas Llosa (2003) says, "transport me and make me be what I usually am not, in possession of a distinct identity" (p. 21); or as the Spanish writer Rosa Montero says, "to be, we have to narrate ourselves, and in this story about ourselves there are many tales: we lie to ourselves, we imagine ourselves, we deceive ourselves" (2003, p. 8).

Is the fiction in the novels perhaps less true than the supposed reality in which we live? I believe not. The books contain ephemeral, intermittent truths that sometimes last for us only as long as the book lasts. **Other times, we take these truths with us for the rest of our lives, and appropriate them in such a way that we make them part of our memories that we retell as small fragments of our existence.** We may talk about a novel we read as we talk about an experience we had, such as the memory of a birthday party.

We lie to ourselves, we imagine, we deceive ourselves, in life and in novels, and it is in this process of coming and going that we

build ourselves, we become. Out of himself, be another, even if it is illusory, is a way to be less slave and to experience the risks of freedom (Vargas Llosa, 2003, p. 28).

As a person, the novels endow me with a freedom to live in the stories of the characters as perhaps I do not dare to do in my other realities, due to fear or not being bold enough. I love reading novels to see how the characters live and also read them in the same way as Vargas Llosa describes: "Novels are not written to tell the life but to transform it by adding something" (2003, p. 17).

When I read a story, I transform it and it transforms me. My relationship with the story and the characters make us accomplices in a story that is mine and stays with me. I then share the story—sometimes with clients, other times with friends—and try to infect others with the excitement I lived when I read it.

It is extraordinary when the story seems real—or, is it perhaps the other way around? There is a brochure in the book *Essay on the Clarity* by José Saramago (2004) that says: "Readers: Whatever happened in the book is solely the product of the powerful imagination of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Reality makes rude efforts to imitate the events described in this novel." Novels teach me about passions, survival, strength, society, justice, nature, politics, animals, relationships, and love. They let me recover my imagination and creativity. As Rosa Montero says:

the socialization process, what we call educate or mature or grow, consists precisely in pruning the fanciful blooms, closing the gates of delirium, expanding our ability to daydream; and woe to him who cannot seal that crack with the other side, that will probably be considered a poor crazy one. (2003, p. 16)

Novels stimulate my critical sense, helping me make sense of and manifest it in the most poetic—but no less committed or challenging—ways, because "fiction enriches existence, completes it and, temporarily, compensates us for this tragic condition that is ours: to wish and dream always more than we can achieve" (Vargas Llosa, 2003, p. 29). As a therapist, my ability to imagine, desire, and dream is the perfect gateway to the openness and flexibility of building the kinds of conversations that allow us to see possibilities where none appeared before. I want to share my experiences with five novels, and in so doing, invite us as therapists to broaden our reading horizons, enrich our vocabulary, and live new lives through the creativity and the experience of others.

***The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie**

Salman Rushdie is a British Indian writer and his books have been translated into thirty seven languages. *The Satanic Verses* is the story of a hijacked airplane that explodes while flying over the English Channel. Two survivors fall into the sea: Gibrel Farishta, a legendary film

heartthrob, and Saladin Chamcha, the man of a thousand voices, a self-taught and rabid Anglophile. They make it to an English beach and notice some strange changes: while one has acquired a halo, the other looks in horror to see that hair grows on his legs, his feet have become hooves, and his temples bulge.

I became interested in this book when I heard it was very controversial and that the author was threatened with death. It is a fantastic story that challenges deeply held beliefs. *The Satanic Verses* has a daring sense of humor that allowed me to think about different ways to be critical and challenge the establishment. The book is also an example of the power of language and how the interaction of readers with the narrative is what makes stories dangerous. The way readers respond to it will give it an existence and a "real" life. If it is fiction, why do we fear it? Is fiction as dangerous as reality?

The Satanic Verses is an exemplary reminder of the importance of being critical and daring to take risks. The following fragment, which I felt to be excellent, is related to the fragility of love, dealing with the circumstances of life, and the confusion generated in us when we discover how vulnerable we are when facing unexpected life events:

Following the thread of his pleasant thoughts the Mirza made a silent speech to his resting wife. "Mishal, I'm forty years old and I'm as pleased as a child of forty days. Now I see that over the years I've been plunging deeper and deeper into our love and now I swim in that warm sea as a fish." How much she gave him admired the Mirza, and how much he needed her! Their marriage transcended mere sensuality, was so intimate that the separation was unthinkable. "Growing old beside you, Mishal—he told her while she slept—will be a privilege." He allowed himself the sentimentality to throw a kiss with the tips of his fingers before leaving the room on tiptoe. When he returned to the front porch of his rooms on the top floor of the mansion, he looked at the gardens that came with the dawn of the mist, and saw the image that would disturb his peace of mind forever, destroying it irretrievably the instant he began to believe it invulnerable to the ravages of fate. When the Mirza Saeed Akhtar saw the girl take her spider breakfast on the grass, he felt a surge of desire so violent that shamed him. "Not possible, he remonstrated; at the end of the day, I'm not an animal." The girl wrapped her body in a saffron yellow sari...when bending over butterflies; the fabric hung forward discovering her small breasts before the astonished gaze of the zaminda. (p. 125)

...Mirza Saeed had to see another sleeping beauty in the same bed, and the second time he felt invaded by something that looked like a very rich and very deep sense to give the rude name of lust. He discovered that he was at the same time troubled for his impure desires and euphoric for the emotions that ran through him, some fresh feelings whose newness excited him greatly. (p.132)

This reminded me of the power of desire and a difficulty that couples have to understand: that even when loving someone deeply, we will want more. In therapy, many stories of pain, separation, and violence are associated with the euphoria that makes us want others. What do we do with these feelings in therapy? Do we censor, promote, silence what we—just like our clients—usually feel? As a therapist, this story teaches me about the importance of listening carefully to clients' experiences. As human beings we have a life full of doubts and certainties, fears and strengths. Therapists and clients sometimes have many perspectives and experiences in common, and they can be a starting point for rich conversations. We are not impartial, but we cannot be judges of our clients. By promoting respectful and careful dialogues, we can be sensitive to what is happening in clients' lives.

***Eternity Finally Starts on a Monday* by Eliseo Alberto**

Eliseo Alberto is a Cuban writer; he has published novels, poetry and his controversial memoirs about his life in Cuba. He was exiled in Mexico from 1990 until his death in 2011.

Eternity Finally Starts on a Monday is about a poor circus with exceptional—and unforgettable, once I got to know them—artists traveling through Latin America and presenting an extraordinary show. Like all human beings, these characters are full of passions. For me, these two fragments briefly illustrate the richness and intensity of the narrative:

Because the Anabel that landed on the distant stage was not the one that had taken off from the opposite turret: if a second is enough to die, how will it not be enough to change our lives? (p. 71)

...They did not deny each other the burning of the skin, nor the warmth of the blood, nor the hot flashes of friction nor the forbidden charms. Not even the silence was refused. They said everything. They invented words when familiar words could not name the actions of those never conjugated verbs. But they never promised anything, because it was really everything, absolutely everything, which they lied to each other. (p. 203)

From this novel I take the rapture of life and the thrill of adventure along with the invitation to enjoy life and live the extraordinary intensely every day, given its frailty. We have let this postmodern world dilute us, sometimes, and as a result set aside the value of friendship, brotherhood, and finally, all relations with others. For me this text is, on the one hand, a renewal of fantasy and how it enriches our lives. On the other hand, this text is an invitation to me in my job (as a therapist) to believe that there is always a new possibility and a new way to see, understand, and be in my relationships with others.

If a therapist talks starting from this position, what impact might that have? This story teaches me that if a therapist generates conversations by asking questions in different and creative ways, and by living and feeling the rapture of life, it is possible that we can better understand the experiences that our clients are living.

***The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel**

Yann Martel was born in Spain and lives in Montreal. In *The Life of Pi*, a solitary lifeboat floats on the wild Pacific after the tragic sinking of a cargo ship. The only survivors of the crash are a child of sixteen named Pi, a hyena, a zebra a female orangutan, and a Bengal tiger.

If I were to summarize in one word what I learned from this story that word would be: faith. What is faith in therapy? How does a therapist act with faith? To me, the therapeutic moral of *The Life of Pi* is about confidence in the other, in relationships, in dialogue, and in what we (client and therapist) can create together. When a client comes to therapy, does he/she have more faith in the therapist than the therapist does in the client? It is very important to believe in our clients and their abilities. This story's lesson to remember is to trust and behave as the situation demands.

***A Gun in the House* by Nadine Gordimer**

Nadine Gordimer is a South African writer. She won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. She was very active in the movement to end Apartheid and her writings reflect her political position. *A Gun in the House* describes the fictionalized life of the Lingords, a middle class couple. Their life undergoes a violent change when their son, an architect, kills his partner. The Lingords ask for help from a famous black lawyer who recently returned from exile, which is a very difficult decision because of racial discrimination.

One of the most poignant lessons that this book gave me is about the idea of justice. The Lingords—shattered by grief and immersed in the uncertainty of life—experience the justice system as a theatrical representation, that is, as a play. This challenged my prior conception of the administration of justice as something powerful and even divine, rather than as a series of relationships, customs, and practices that are simply human. This novel is an invitation to be more critical about society and social discourses, but it also invites us to be better human beings. I want to share a few fragments that hopefully could transmit the intensity of what we—the Lingords and me (as a reader)—went through:

Duncan, only son of Harald and Claudia has been sentenced to death for killing his roommate...Impossible to say: Sentenced to death. They spent so much time lying down. In the end, she noticed that he had fallen asleep, the hand that was on her moved in a submerged grief like dog paws while it dreamed that it was running. Harald no longer prays. Suddenly, she realized that, and it was terrible. She cried, careful not to wake him, his mouth open in a gasp, tears rolling over her. (p. 98)

...Already at the trial, the judge stood up, the meeting was adjourned. The crowd came to life, like at the end of an act in a play at any theater; they would return ... We will not call more witnesses,

told them (the lawyer) pausing and shrugging his shoulders with a gesture indicating: that suits me. We? He was in a hurry to talk to his assistant. When he left them, (Harald and Claudia) they saw him greet his opponent, the prosecutor; the two robed men stopped, Motsamai's arm (their lawyer) rested briefly on the shoulder of the other, they shook their heads about an issue, laughed together and got away from each other...So for them, everything was a representation; for the judge, the assessors, the prosecutor, even for Motsamai. Justice is a theatrical representation, a play. (p. 102)

The Elephant's Journey by Jose Saramago

Jose Saramago is a Portuguese writer; he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998. To me, Saramago's novels are always full of a kind of ironic innocence; they show you that life has some tragedies, but we must go on. *The Elephant's Journey* is set in the mid-sixteenth century. In the novel, King John III offers his cousin, Archduke Maximilian of Austria, an Asian elephant. The novel focuses on the epic journey of the elephant, named Solomon, who had to tour Europe for actual foolish whims and absurd strategies.

The book's central message is about innocence and good humor. What are these good for a therapist? Innocence can be understood as openness to experience, not believing we know,—taking things as they arrive and living them. In therapy, innocence leads us to ask without judgment, and to listen in order to appreciate. It is a willingness to an open, interested, and—I dare say—honest dialogue. To have good humor is to laugh at life and its absurdities and to believe in the unbelievable. As therapists, good humor enables us capable to appreciate the most unusual stories and see them as life, not as pathologies.

Saramago also speaks of the poetic moments, which just happen when they happen. How can we as therapists create poetic moments in the dialogue with our clients? How can we create experiences together that enrich, inspire, and give us courage to continue with life?

Conclusion

Every time I read a new novel, I am eager to begin the story and get to know the characters. I am curious about the characters' developments and experiences; I am thrilled to know who the players are and what their lives are like. When I meet with some of my clients that same feeling of excitement comes over me.

We therapists are privileged, in that people share their stories with us. By reading novels, we can broaden our perspective about life and possibilities. As Kenneth Burke (2009, p. 6) says, the stories provision us for life.

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End Notes

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² Notice: all references have been published in Spanish, translation belongs to Julio Richter.

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